

Observe Sept. 11 as a day of warning

By James A. Haught

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The most startling event of our lifetime still partly baffles most Americans. Nearly a year later, we know many details about 9-11, but few can answer the deep questions at the heart of the tragedy.

Why did 19 young men want to kill thousands of defenseless strangers who had done them no harm?

Why did they desire it so fervently that they sacrificed their own lives to accomplish it?

As they lived in America, plotting the mass murder, why didn't they feel empathy for surrounding people and families -- but instead felt only a compulsion to kill them?

The historic suicide attack was insanity -- but were the killers insane?

Normal people can't answer these questions, I think, because normal people can't understand fanatics. We can't comprehend hate mixed with religion. It's too contradictory for our minds to grasp. Yet that was the deadly driving force behind the worst murder in American history.

The best clue to the killers' motive is found in their own rallying call, a handwritten exhortation found in their luggage after the horror. Over and over, it beseeched the zealots to kill for God and give their lives gladly, confident that they would be transported to a magical heaven where each would enjoy an allotment of adoring virgins. Here are a few passages, translated from Arabic:

"When the taxi takes you to the airport, remember God constantly.... Smile and be calm, for God is with the believers, and the angels protect you.... And say, 'Oh Lord, take Your anger out on them, and we ask You to protect us from their evils.' And say, 'Oh Lord, block their vision from in front of them, so that they may not see.'... God will weaken the schemes of the non-believers....

"Be happy, optimistic, calm, because you are heading for a deed that God loves and will accept. It will be the day, God willing, that you spend with the women of paradise.... Remember that this a battle for the sake of God, as He said in His book: 'Oh Lord, pour Your patience upon us and make our feet steadfast to give us victory over the infidels....

"Know that the gardens of paradise are waiting for you in all their beauty, and the women of paradise are waiting, calling out, 'Come hither, friend of God.' They have dressed in their most beautiful clothing.... Remind your brothers that this act is for Almighty God."

Astounding! They saw Americans only as "infidels" -- and they believed that killing infidels along with themselves would guarantee them eternal pleasure with houri nymphs. They were driven by adolescent male sex fantasies, plus heaven-seeking. It was mass murder as a route to paradise.

The terrorists obeyed a "fatwa" (holy edict) issued in 1998 by Osama bin Laden, which said in part: "We call on every Muslim who believes in God and hopes for reward to obey God's command to kill the Americans and plunder their possessions.... Launch attacks against the armies of the American devils and against those who are allied with them among the helpers of Satan."

What idiocy, to be impelled by "God's command to kill the Americans." Only sickos think God wants them to kill people.

The 9-11 tragedy wasn't unique. Throughout history, twisted, fermented, supernatural beliefs have caused a wide variety of horrors -- from human sacrifice to the Crusades, from the Inquisition to holy wars, from witch-burnings to bloody pogroms, from Jonestown to the David Koresh compound, from nerve gas planted in Tokyo subways by cultists to salmonella planted in Oregon restaurant salad bars by different cultists. Murders at abortion clinics are part of the spectrum. To varying extent, so are assassinations in Ulster, religious riots in India and suicide bombings in Israel.

As the first anniversary of 9-11 approaches, many commemorative events and special publications are being planned. I think the day should become a permanent time to reflect on the peril posed by crackpot extremists.

England still celebrates Guy Fawkes Day to mark the thwarting of a 1605 Catholic plot to blow up Protestants in Parliament. America's tragedy was vastly worse. Sept. 11 should be preserved as a global day of warning, cautioning humanity to beware of the ghastly mix of religion and hate.

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